

## **BEYOND DATABASES: A CREATIVE APPROACH IN KEEPING UP WITH OUR GROWING RESOURCES**

### ***Introduction:***

Most libraries in the 21st century provide databases for their users. These databases seem to have rapidly multiplied over the years. At our academic library, there are over 320 databases available giving both librarians and patrons a broad array to choose from at any given time.

Even with this abundance many of us have a tendency to refer patrons to a narrower list of “Favorite Databases” while unconsciously ignoring a larger body of rich databases we maintain and pay for on a regular basis. Some on my list of “Favorite Databases” include: *Academic Search Premier, America: History and Life, Biosis, Business Source Premier, Com Abstracts, Compendex, ERIC, GPO, Inspec, Lexis Nexis, Medline, MLA, PsycInfo, Proquest, SciFinder Scholar, SPORTDiscus, Web of Knowledge and WorldCat*. They become favorites just because they are so easy to use and are widely used on our campus by both librarians and patrons alike.

While this list is a good start to work with, we still have over 300 databases we are not tapping into at this time. Should we not make the most of what resources we have, evaluate the needs of our patrons, and recommend and use these lesser used databases? Let us try and benefit from this bountiful collection.

### ***Statement of Problem:***

It quickly came to my attention that if I was to keep up with the steady flow of databases within our collection, I had to spend time getting familiar with what we had so I could promote these at the reference desk or use them during library instruction sessions, research consultations, and other work.

During a recent performance evaluation, I made the database review a goal of mine for the coming year. I decided to study our list of databases from A-Z and was encouraged to advertise this to our librarians and staff by the department head. It turned out that several other people had an interest in perusing our database collection to see what we actually had and how to navigate them.

### ***Method:***

The Database Review, as it came to be known, met weekly for about 11 months to assess what we subscribed to at the University of Utah's Marriott Library from May 2004-April 2005. We met each week for an hour in a library classroom that had the Internet and a projection unit. Each time, a group member would volunteer to keyboard and we investigated about 6-8 databases. We examined features such as a thesaurus or index, help screens, the ability to print, download, or email citations, and overall ease. Each week I would keep notes and jotted the date and the title of the database, as well as the positive and negative facets of the resource. Others kept notes of various kinds and sometimes shared this information with their department colleagues who may not have been present. Often, when our searches were

performed, we would use the same two or three keywords to see what results were yielded.

This was an informal meeting and soon a core group of attendees formed. The composition of the group was a good mix of staff members and librarians. Who was attracted to attend? Regular participation each week included the head of General Reference, a Science and Engineering librarian, the Electronic Resources librarian, the Electronic Resources Coordinator, the Maps librarian, the Web Services librarian, a Western Americana specialist, the head of access services, the head of Circulation, the Web Graphic Designer and myself, from the General Reference department. Those who attended occasionally were staff from the Middle East Library, General Reference, Collection Development, Instruction, Cataloging and Government Documents. About 9 people attended each session on average.

***Results:***

Each week we examined a portion of our databases to see how well the links worked and what their special attributes might be. Many of us at times were amazed to discover what we actually subscribed to and some of these databases were also questioned as to their function and purpose. In almost a year we traveled through our A-Z list of databases and discovered some of interest or uniqueness.

By inviting others to participate, our close-knit group shared in this endeavor. I was glad not to be simply engaging in this activity by myself. There was a variety of academic backgrounds and so everyone had a distinctive perspective of a database which made our group appear balanced. When a database was displayed, some of us may have been familiar with it and would share our knowledge with others.

Also, our group had different roles within our library as we worked in various departments in the building. This added to the wide amount of knowledge that was dispersed during the sessions as attendees often discussed how a database might impact their work. The electronic resources staff might view a database differently from a person in the Instruction department. The diversity at the Database Review worked to our advantage so we could each benefit by our colleague's presence.

We came across some gems in our collection and I made note of these. My gems list included: *American Society for Metals Handbooks*, *Avery index to Architectural Periodicals*, *Electronic Companion to Complete Nutrition*, *Global Development Finance*, *Global Newsbank*, *International Index to the Performing Arts*, *Leisure Tourism*, *Latin American Database*, *Latin American Studies*, *Material Safety Data Sheets*, and *Visual Thesaurus* to name a few.

***Summary:***

Our Database Review group came to the conclusion that this weekly exercise was a worthwhile undertaking. We learned a great deal about the library's online resources in a variety of disciplines serving the 81 departments on the University of Utah campus. Now we can actually share this information and try to promote some

of the less known and used databases to our patrons while performing our reference desk tasks, teaching library classes or during in-depth research consultations, meetings and other projects. Within the library, the review of databases was also useful as a tool for collection development as we looked at database usage statistics and cost.

*Conclusion:*

For various reasons, many of us who work with our library's list of databases seem to keep current with only a small segment of what we have. We utilize these "Favorite Databases" for our work assignments and public service activities.

One reason for this could be that we actually feel more comfortable and at ease with our "Favorite Databases" than exploring some unknown resources that are in the collection. Some databases are more user friendly than others. All library users, whether patrons or staff can easily identify which databases are user friendly. A third explanation may be the culture that we have today. Throughout the busy day, patrons and staff look for instant gratification to make our lives easier so we can rush off to something else that seeks our immediate attention. Having a shorter list of excellent resources to rely on makes our hectic lives a bit less complicated.

Whatever the reason, human nature seems to sway us in the direction of a list of "Favorite Databases" when we are engaged in our library activities. I have now challenged myself to supplement the short list of databases with other titles. For one thing, our library spends over \$943,000 on databases each year. Yet, we are also engaged in seriously analyzing our resources due to our ever shrinking budgets and we often must cut lesser used library resources, including databases.

The University of Utah, like many libraries has a rich collection to offer. We are fortunate to have an extensive assortment of online databases at our fingertips and would like everyone to benefit from utilizing these resources. It is time to go beyond our traditional borders and look to the sometimes concealed cache of lesser used databases and bring them to the awareness of our users and colleagues. This also makes good economic sense due to our occasional evaporating financial situations we face at times.

At our library, the Database Review provided a means for an inexpensive assessment in an informal setting for several people at a time. This creative tool gave us a chance to easily go through an extensive list of resources and to get familiarized with them.

Working with less familiar databases keeps the work of librarians fresher, challenges ourselves and inspires us to go beyond the usual borders of our work.

## References

Dempsey, K. (2005). Managing Many Assets. *Computers in Libraries*, 35 (4), 4.

Smallwood, S. (2003). The Crumbling Intellectual Foundation. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49 (4), A10.

Tenopir, C. (2003). Predicting the Future of Databases. *Library Journal*, 128 (10), 33.

University of Utah. (2005). University of Utah Facts. Retrieved on September 28, 2005 at <http://www.utah.edu/unews/facts/index.html>

University of Utah. (2005). University of Utah, Marriott Library, Article Databases and More. Retrieved on September 28, 2005 at <http://db1-sql.staff.library.utah.edu/databaseOfDatabase/>